INTERVIEWEE: ED PEARL

INTERVIEWER: Victor Cohen

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EP: Kathy and Carol. It's the same thing that made the Kentucky Colonels, the Country Boys, that is, the White brothers, that is again. And the Chambers brothers, it made them so important to the Ash Grove because here were these very young people that other young people were listening to, or were learning to play, were fascinated by the music, the instruments, and all of that. Anyway – this is a sidebar. Most of the people who you heard playing this at the Ash Grove, or anywhere else, were old people that we brought in.

VC: Like the folks who grew up playing it in the forties?

EP: Well, no. Even – what is her name? We had a couple of really great singers from the Ozarks and Appalachians. Alameda Riddle was one of them.

VC: I'm familiar with that _____.

EP: Of course, Miguel Carter. But Alameda Riddle still have the backwoods nuances and things that were flattened out by the Carter family, which made them reachable and popular, and popularizing of – which is why they were important beyond their little community. But people like Alameda Riddle, Texas Gladden, other great keepers of the tradition, many, many of whom were women who stayed home and sang to the children and all that, as opposed to the men. Right? I mean, who raises kids? Men are working. Men sing other kinds of songs. But

if you look at it in terms of what people do in real life, and how these things happen.

Like we were saying before, these songs were preserved in Appalachia and they weren't preserved in the British Isles, after they were forgotten in the British Isles. And James Francis Child, I guess a Harvard professor of music, collected many, many, many – and documented the words and whatnot of these songs. I'm not even sure that he – yes, of course he did, he had to have. I don't know his years, but he had to have lived through some form of recording because people like John Jacob Niles learned from him, songs.

So we brought all of these great people, but the thing that was absolutely dynamic to younger people would be to hear, in this case, young, beautiful girls do this stuff perfectly.

VC: Right. This is Kathy – what are they called?

EP: Kathy Larish and Carol McComb. Carol is the music director of the duo.

VC: Kathy Larish and Carol – what was the last name?

EP: McComb – M-c capital C-o-m-b. Larish, L-a-r-i-s-h. And Kathy with a K. Even though I spelled it with a C over there, I just remembered.

VC: How did *they* come to it? Do you know?

EP: I forget. I really do. I used to know.

VC: What was so riveting about seeing these kids play, to the audience?

EP: Well, in the entire country music, mountain, Appalachian Mountain music that was brought to the Ash Grove was brought by who? The New Lost City Ramblers, the Greenbrier Boys, the Charleston River Boys, the this boys, the that

boys. And when this one young woman from England played around the Ash Grove, bluegrass, a banjo player, she was called Girl Scruggs. (laughs) What I'm saying is, it was very much a men's thing, and almost everyone was much older than these two waifs. And then they show up and they're perfect in every respect, and they just, you know, sing.

So every young woman that listened to them – and there were quite a number. Rita Wilde. I mean, we had really good singers of country music. _____ Allman – her name is Swedish, but she's from Vermont – and Rita Wilde were two of the best. Then Kathy and Carol were even younger than _____ and Rita, and there was two of them. Anyway, so it was just unusual.

VC: Right. Were most of the performers on the stage men?

EP: I don't think so. Lynn Gold, _____, Odetta, Barbara Dane.

VC: I picked up a Barbara Dane album. She sells them on her website, so I just went on and bought it there.

EP: Oh, yeah? Which one?

VC: That one you were playing.

EP: You mean the one at the Ash Grove?

VC: No, it was a –

EP: The blues thing?

VC: Yeah. It was like the blues, but she had that coronet.

EP: Yeah. Kenny Woodson and Herman _____. Well anyway, they met at the Ash Grove. I don't know when that –

VC: Yeah, I don't know when it was recorded.

EP: Is there audience clapping?

VC: No. It's a studio.

EP: So it's a studio. So probably it's Oakland, because she lived in San Francisco and Oakland, and Berkeley.

VC: Yeah. It's great. I guess she sells them herself. They're not in print. She had to re-release or reprint them, or something. I think it's kind of remarkable, someone of her caliber being so un –

EP: Well, these things go up and down, you know. Mostly go up and down once, and stay there for many years. But yeah, she's a very motivated, very driven person. She produced – what's it called? Not Poseidon Records but a whole bunch of international recordings. What's the name of that?

VC: I forget. I was reading about it on the website.

EP: Yeah. So she produced all those records, just kind of revolutionary songs, around the world, from various countries and during the very political period when there was so much political music coming out. Polygon. I don't know what it means. Or I've forgotten what it means. So yeah, then she sold it a number of years ago. And she's married. She's married to Irwin Silber, who not only was the editor of *Sing Out!* and then the *Guardian*, but before then, he worked for Moe Asch and put out folk tales with Moe. He did a lot of the business for Moe. So Irwin knows the business very well. Barbara was hooked up with Irwin by the time he started Polygon, about '65, I think, something like that, '64, '65.

VC: Was she that political when she started singing at the Ash Grove?

EP: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. She started her – she was a good singer in church,

and whatnot, and she heard Pete Seeger at a rally in Detroit in the forties, and she just got turned on to political music, progressive music. And then I think she must have been engaged in the Henry Wallace campaign in '48, et cetera, and she just never stopped.

VC: Wow. So it was way back for her.

EP: Yeah. Her younger sister is part of the – what is it called? The Singing Grammies or –

VC: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

EP: She moved from Detroit. She lives in Burbank. Her sister – I forget her name for the moment. Nice woman.

VC: I want to ask you today about the Ash Grove, like when – we talked about the very early period when it was just starting out, and it was very eclectic.

EP: Yeah.

VC: In retrospect, it seems like the reputation it had at the end was like folk and _____.

EP: Yeah, traditional music.

VC: When did that sort of seem to take hold?

EP: That began taking over when the audience changed and significantly lowered. That started in 1960. When I started the Ash Grove people were in their twenties, and when we started – when Lightnin' Hopkins came around, and the New Lost City Ramblers and the Country Boys, and then began bringing the bluegrass in, a lot of it via the New Lost City Ramblers or Ralph Rensler, and then these other people began – anyway, the banjo craze, combined with bringing

the music in, started attracting younger and younger people, and that sort of process began in '60, but really became solid in '62. I never really gave up on the older stuff, but the excitement was around. That could be like money in the bank, if I think of it, and keeping in touch with the broader audience. Not all of them, because some of them didn't like what I was doing, resented it.

VC: Really.

EP: Yeah, really resented it.

VC: How come?

EP: Because I was giving playing time – I'll give you the epitome of that. There was a wonderful singer, who as a child, fled the Nazis from her native Vienna, Martha Schlamme, and I'd say that she would be a little bit younger than Pete is now. She'd be definitely in her late eighties. But she died twenty years ago, something like that. Anyway, Martha sang at the Ash Grove, and through a significant middle-aged, middle-class, Left audience, she was undoubtedly – I never asked her, but whether she belonged to the party or not, she was part of the international music and all that. She was a real Viennese actress/singer. And she could be a little girl one minute – I mean, she was really a professional, from Europe. And Martha was a major hit. Did you ever hear of the television series *Peter Gunn*?

VC: Yeah.

EP: Okay. The detective in there was played by Herschel Bernardi, who was an actor also – no longer with us –

[telephone - recorder off, then resumes]

EP: Herschel Bernardi was incredibly funny. He could be a Yiddish comic. At the Ash Grove he did strictly English language stuff. But he was very, very funny. Very funny. He would stop by, ride his motorcycle, and became a friend and all that. Well, I booked something like Doc Watson, or something like that, instead of Martha one time in '63 or '64, when I was really into it. And he came and he was thoroughly insulted because Martha had really wanted it, and she was a friend of his. Now mind you, this is from a person with no politics. He says, "These people can't even speak proper English." I just looked at him and I said, "Well, this is the path I'm going down." So he was very angry and he didn't come in again for about a year, at least a year.

VC: Wow. Interesting.

EP: But a lot of people like that, who were used to the Israeli or the Mike Janis or the Russian or the gypsies, or whatever it is, their culture, as opposed to American culture. Or they liked The Terriers but they wouldn't like – they might like Doc Watson because he's such a great guitarist, but short of that, they wouldn't like Ralph Stanley – Ralph and Carter –

VC: So it was like almost a high culture versus mass, popular –

EP: Yeah. See, it was very confused at the beginning of the period. The Kingston Trio, musically, were a joke, right? There was nothing there. But they opened it up, and they were very popular. They had dozens, if not hundreds, of copiers. And people would take folk songs – I mean, Judy Collins is a perfect example of that, of creating sort of – I mean, Joan Baez did it by elevating the art

on another level and interspersing it with songs that made sense to both us, but also to those people.

But as I moved into the – and wanted to hear things like Kathy and Carol, or Texas Gladden and Alameda Riddle even, to hear the real stuff, which these girls learned from, or they learned from that one song from Clarence Ashley, for example. Their role models were very different, and their ears were very different, and their contemporaries had different ears and were attracted to different things. So a lot of people didn't come in. I continued to have, but not anywhere near so often, groups of people. My sister booked groups, and we started out booking every Jewish group and every Zionist group, or every peace group, and every this and that you can imagine. They would come in, fifty people for half price. And I don't care whether they sold the tickets for five dollars, when they paid me a dollar or less. What did I care? It was fine, it was good.
So they would do things, and they would listen to somebody that sang peace songs that they understood, whether it was Pete Seeger or Guy Carawan, or whatever. But they were not interested, initially, in the traditional music. It had to be prettified. It's the difference between – well, on a different level, it's the difference between the Almanac Singers and The Weavers. The first one was for the workers, and it was directly sung to them as an organizing thing. The second one was for a pop record and for the New York nightclubs. The Weavers. But the format was the same, three men and a girl. So instead of Bess _____, it was Ronny Gilbert. Fred Hellerman was a wonderful guitarist, but it was in classical music. _____ had a very pleasant bass voice, and Pete was Pete. So it was

acceptable to both. But anyway, there are differences in audiences, so that's what happened.

People get very offended when their music changes, or what I was offering changed. The same thing happened when I started putting on Elaine Brown and the Black Panthers, singing and talking about the Black Panthers. My brother would stop coming.

VC: Really.

EP: Yeah. For years. Unless he was backing a particular musician.

VC: Just for the record, when did you start having the Panthers come?

EP: Well, after they existed, which was '68. I mean, they existed in '67, but '69, '70, '71, that sort of thing. They were all dead by '72. I mean, pretty much broken. So it was just a brief period, really.

But before that – back to the change in traditional music. And then it was really developed tremendously by Bernie and David Cohen opening the Ash Grove School of Traditional Music, which I think was 1963, I believe. It might have been even late '62. Then that allowed people – because Bernie and David knew how to play and how to teach what these guys did, how to break it down. And then they could also bring in the performers and let them get the money by doing a master class or something of that sort, or a demonstration. They would split the money with them, or whatever. But they weren't doing it for money. I mean, well, actually, that's not true. Actually, they made a living out of it for a couple of years there.

What they did is, they actually were able to convey the techniques,

in a sense, and put kids in contact directly with the performers. So that developed the – the Ash Grove – as you know from Lynn's writing, the Ash Grove atmosphere was always very welcome and warm. But this made it welcome to people from the other half of the country, from another world, you might say. So this helped a lot also in developing the audience. So that way the _____ would come, or the Ramblers for awhile. I think the Ramblers actually heard Kathy and Carol in San Diego and asked me to put them on, and then they became Ash Grove performers, after that one time. They did that with a number of people like that.

Anyway, so that – it just exploded. Starting '63, '64, '65 and at least – so there were three or four years where unaccompanied mountain string music and unaccompanied Delta music of every style, the upper Delta. Not even the Delta, but – I forget what it's called in Mississippi where Junior – oh, God. Well anyway, there are a number of musics in Mississippi and – I mean, Brownie McGee is from Brownsville, Tennessee; Sonny Terry is from North Carolina. It's not like everything came from the Mississippi Delta, but the Mississippi Delta is one of the great repositories of the blues music, and it's singing, and so on. With big cotton fields and swamps and prisons and _____ black people are together and oppressed, and so it just flowed.

So all these things together – I mean, you had to choose, and I wanted to discard the non-great music that I had been forced to put on early on.

VC: Like what?

EP: Well, I mean, like – even though they were excellent for their time and I'm

– like The Terriers, as a trio, promoted by Harold Leventhal, Pete Seeger's manager, and singing African American music, but with Eric Weisberg playing the banjo. And they could sing country music, and so on. And all of it was done with – the harmonies, the presentation, the dress, and so on, was for either an elegant nightclub or a concert hall. That's what was done. That, to me, was not – I mean, that was very nice for its time and I welcomed it at that time. I put on groups like that, and that was one of the better ones. Best ones, I should say. But it was time to move on to the real stuff. I was always going for deeper, I always *wanted* to go for deeper. I knew that. I think I told you that. Back in '56 when I heard the real stuff. And as people discovered that stuff, that was what I wanted, and that's what younger people wanted. And I just put it on, and as soon as somebody would discover somebody, I'd put them on. Skip James, John _____, whoever.

VC: Really.

EP: Yeah. Every one of them. And then John Fahey was doing that. Dick Waterman. I forget the names of the other people, but there are a number of them that did that. Plus Ralph Rensler and Mike Seeger, John Cohen, John Fahey. A number of people went down there and would find one or – Chris Strachwitz. Chris brought Mance Lipscomb.

VC: So where did they all hear about it first?

EP: Half of them, accidentally. I think John went down to Kentucky for something or other and couldn't do anything, so he had nothing better to do, so he just asked people, Are there any singers there? And he wound up meeting Roscoe

Holcomb. That's what happened. That's what people did. If they weren't killed by doing it. But a lot of that stuff took place before, and they were white people looking for black or white people, so they never – they were very circumspect. They're not terribly political people anyway, so they weren't down there to make any fuss. Probably there was suspicion, but they were engaging people. I imagine if you were totally shy or something, you wouldn't have been able to talk to people.

I'd do the same thing, but I did it when Kate and Marnie and I traveled to Free Southern Theater in '65 and were with Free Southern Theater in New Orleans. Then Kate and I – I mean, she was acting and teaching dance, and whatnot. I just was hanging out. Well, I was helping in the office, but I also – I met Babe Stovall. I was just walking down the street and there was this guy playing on his porch. It turns out it was Babe Stovall. So that was luck. Also, I met the New Orleans jazz band. I forget – the Heritage. What's the name?

VC: The Heritage Brass Band or something?

EP: Yeah, yeah. And this guy Allen, from New York, had formed this, a Jewish guy. They had their own place, so we went and saw them. And I became friends with him, so he suggested a couple of people, and so on. So it came about that Kate and I, and a couple of times with Gil Moses and Denise Nicholas – Gil Moses was a producer/actor, and John O'Neill, also a producer/actor, formed the Free Southern Theater. They were both members of SNCC. So they started Free Southern Theater, and they did plays based on the actual experiences of blacks and whites meeting each other, basically around the struggle, and so on.

So anyway, there were – and they had a big space, so that's where – we were down there to be part of that. It was before SNCC decided – Stokely Carmichael took over and didn't want white people – they wanted to empower black people by not having white people around to teach them. And it was right before that. So we were there, and I – I helped out a lot, because I could – first of all, I knew what I was doing, and so I really helped them in that way. They didn't have to tell me about producing something. The other thing was, I was white, so I could rent a truck when they couldn't.

VC: Really.

EP: Yeah, really. Yeah, really. I mean, John had no _____. When I'd show up with John after he rented something on the phone, they were shocked. (laughs) So I'd let him drive, like he was driving me. (laughs) Till we'd get out of there, then I could take the wheel. It was really funny. But you had to do those kind of things. I mean, what was the option? Not to get it, or be beat up, or something.

VC: Yeah, right.

EP: But anyway, we went out in the country. And we also integrated some restaurants, and it was carefully – well, we didn't go into any bars. Any white bars, that is.

VC: Really.

EP: Yeah. Are you kidding? We'd have been killed. But we did go to like an equivalent of a McDonald's or something like that. We did two or three of those. We did integrate those just by sitting down and ordering, and whatnot.

VC: How was that? You know, growing up in Boyle Heights, though, like you

did, was that a strange experience, dealing with race in the South?

EP: Yeah.

VC: Wasn't there racial tension in L.A. when you grew up?

EP: No. I mean, there wasn't in my head. And everything that we did. Like when I helped lead that walkout at school and all that, we walked downtown, and they were all the high school kids, Mexican, white, black, a lot of black. We were arguing against Gerald L.K. Smith. So we just had a great time. We met everybody and we all went to the soda shops and had malts together. We emptied our parents' purse if they were stupid enough to leave any money around. (laughs) So we were kings for a day. Kids don't think about what's going to happen the next day.

It was very different. When we went down there, on the way down there, we drove through Texas. We visited Mance on the way down there. We visited Lightning on the way back. Anyway, we went to Navasota and we had a nice meal with Mance and his wife, and all that. They hadn't eaten dinner together for many years, because he was working all day and she got home early, so they just had a practice _____. So when we showed up, we got a long story about it. Because I asked, "What do you mean?" (both laugh) _____ all those things that happened forty years early, or something.

So anyway, we were driving down there and – you have to understand, my wife, my girlfriend in life, and our daughter were both blonde and beautiful, just movie star beautiful, Kate was. And I'm not. And I went into a market or liquor store and asked for directions. So as soon as we pulled out of

that store there was a car following us, because we had a California license plate, and maybe because of the way I looked. I don't look particularly Jewish, but I'm just saying that –

VC: Right. You weren't a local.

EP: I think it was the California license plate. And the guy stuck with us. I knew we were being followed. I told her. Then there was a terrible accident that happened in front of us. About two blocks in front of us where two cars just really hit each other. I looked back and I could see the guy in the pickup truck following us had a CB radio and he was talking into it. Or, you know, he had a microphone or something. A cop car showed up within – we waited there maybe five minutes and a cop car showed up, and an ambulance. It was because that guy was following us. Whoever – and then we left, and so on, and nothing ever happened to us. But they definitely wanted to see what our intentions were. And it was scary, because already Schwerner and Chaney and Goodman had been killed by then. Mississippi Summer was in '64. We were aware of all that. And the place was shot at a couple times.

VC: The theater.

EP: Yeah. I was upstairs and I was telling everybody to get down, and Kate yelled at me and pulled me down. I was standing in front of an open window like an idiot. Like I said, I'd never been in a situation like that before.

VC: Wow. So it was during broad daylight when people were in there and they started shooting.

EP: Yeah. Just a couple times and nothing – but then I took Marnie home,

driving alone, when Kate went on tour with a group into Mississippi, because that was going to be dangerous and Marnie couldn't go, so we went home and she came home a month later.

VC: When you were talking to these old musicians, especially the black ones, did they wonder what you were doing, or was there any –

EP: No. Oh, yeah, what I started to say is that, with Gil and Denise, we visited musicians, and they were always delighted to see us and would make a chicken dinner, and we would talk. They just enjoyed playing their music, that somebody was interested enough to come and hear their music. And then they would pass me on to the next person. Then we'd tell them about what we were doing.

VC: With the Ash Gove, you mean?

EP: Well –

VC: Or just in general.

EP: That I was putting on music and I could mention a couple of names. But also, what Gil and Denise and Kate and I were doing in New Orleans, which was of interest to black people.

VC: Right. When all these kids started, in L.A., getting into the traditional blues, or whatever the music was, what were they thinking?

EP: Well, that's the thing. That's a thing that I became aware of, that the great value would be to show music in the context of the history and the experience of the culture, black culture. And that was really important to me. More important to me after I got back than – well, it was important before. The Freedom Singers had already been at the Ash Grove. But this was different, because this was not

younger people singing freedom songs and picketing _____. This had to do with white people not simply stealing the music and changing it, but –

So then I began documenting the lives of people, making the point that music of a culture, among other things, shows the culture, is the way that the culture carries on, in many significant ways. I mean, they don't write, they sing. So it's singing in tales, and it's easier to sing than to remember a long tale. And people can dance to it, and it's sensual, it's a different experience. I mean, the audience that I'm dealing with, that's what attracted them in the first place.

The other point is that much of the music that dealt with issues other than sexuality or religion had been repressed, in the recording industry. That is, that the songs that people sang about what they did for 80 percent of their working hours, about work, and their relationship to the boss and to the process and to other people, and so on and so forth, had been completely extricated. Not the least bit interested in by the people who owned the record companies. Period. And then emulated by the black record companies. Period. Just it didn't exist. And the only thing that was there was that. No songs about children, no songs about – some songs about parents, not too many. But I mean, about family life, about anything, about education, about aspirations, other than going to Heaven, or whatever.

And the same thing on another level was true with the white people, same thing. The country music. That's why it was the Carter Family and not Clarence Ashley. I mean, it was country music, but it was brought without nasal qualities and not with the scales that mountain music sang, which are complex. Not with the kind

of rhythm – that's why Earl Scruggs was initially more popular than Ralph Stanley, because Ralph Stanley played a different rhythm banjo. It was not the same as two-four, or whatever, three-four, or anything. It's very different. In fact, the original banjos, or bangors as they used to call them – somehow that's close to the African, whatever they call it. I think it's called a bango there, but the white bango players – then it became banjer and then banjo – was without frets and people just played it differently, like a dulcimer or a zither or something like that. So I tried to make the point – I mean, by making the point meaning displaying it. It was really pretty nifty because I would always show it to the performers before they went on the stage for the first time, show them what I was saying about their community. I'd ask them if there was anything that shouldn't be there that was wrong or different. And probably because they were just so pleased that anyone was paying attention to their people, I never had a single complaint, even when I got to know them better. People like Merle Travis and people like that who really had politics and were silent, primarily, in their own community because there was –

VC: Really.

EP: Yeah. Merle told me that. He said, "Ed, you have no idea what my politics really are." He was in the army and he had a chance to meet people from all over the world in Europe, and whatnot, and he had become a very progressive political person.

VC: Really. Merle Travis, the guitar player?

EP: Yeah.

VC: Really hot guitar player.

EP: Yeah. He wrote "Come and Listen You People," "Seek Not Your Fortune in the Dark Dirty Mines." He wrote "Sixteen Ton." He was capable of writing a lot more of that kind of thing, but he made his money by being funny, "Smoke, Smoke, Smoke That Cigarette." And picking, and all of that, and being a good ole' boy. But he had real feelings.

I'll just tell you this one thing. He happened to be performing the night that Martin Luther King was killed. And I heard about it on the radio. You know about the story of the Free Speech Movement, where this guy sat in a car and all that, with Mario Salviosa. Well, the guy in the car was a guy named Jack Weinberg. He became a really close friend of mine. Brilliant, brilliant, wonderful, political person. He was the one who coined the phrase, "Don't trust anyone over thirty." Well, in 1968, March 17th or whatever that date was, that was Jack's thirtieth birthday. So Jack and – I forget her name. I'll remember it. Nora. An English woman. Jack was going with her and they came over to our house. We were having dinner. And turned on the radio and Martin Luther King had just been assassinated.

So I called the club, and people didn't know. It was like eight and they didn't know what they should do. I said, "I'll come right down." So I did. And Merle was crying about this. He was really upset about it. And it was clear to me that – so I said, "Merle, I don't think we should play tonight, do you?" And he said, "No." So we didn't. We just called it off.

Then, as usual, the only time I ever had phone calls from other nightclub owners,

all the nightclub owners were calling to see what I was doing so they would know what to do, because they didn't know how to react politically, or how to even – even something like Martin Luther King. I'm serious. Doug Weston and the guy – Oliver Valentine, and other people like that. My only contact with those people was when something would happen. John Kennedy. Whatever. Their lives were so dedicated to making money and being drugged, or whatever they do. It was being drugged, a lot of it. (laughs) To be blunt about it. In one guy's case, robbing and stealing, and everything else.

Anyway, then I would be consulted on as to proper etiquette in view of a national tragedy. (laughs) But them, if they could make twenty bucks, or whatever, they would do it. But they didn't want to be seen as – people would say, Oh my God, look at the Ash Grove, something like that. I never asked for it. That seemed to be about – nobody ever copied me in terms of what I did, or anything. You know what I mean? That was the other thing. I had the world to myself.

VC: What do you mean?

EP: I could get all these great artists for what I could afford. I mean, nobody hired them away from me. As opposed to hiring, of course, John Hammond away from me.

VC: Interesting.

EP: Yeah, but that was much later on. Anyway, so that was a situation which I – I'd more and more presented through photographs and, if there was an incident, like a strike in Hazard, Kentucky, or the Mississippi Freedom Summer, so on and so forth, whatever was happening in the South. But I didn't just do that. What I

want so say is that I tried to show as complete a cultural life as what really existed. Most people don't spend their lives thinking about politics. But they're there. But at least it wasn't ignored. Their working conditions weren't ignored. That didn't have to be exploitation. It could be that this particular – I can't remember his name, the guy who made banjos. He was a wonderful fretless banjo player. So I had an exhibit of his banjos, and the process that he made, and so on and so forth. Moonshine making.

It was interesting. Tried to keep it interesting, put it on the front – and then people would read that and then they'd go back and they'd have a different sense of who they're listening to. Almost without exception, people would get up on stage and at some point they'd say, "I want you all to go out and see what Ed just did. That shows the truth." Bill Monroe liked to say that. "That's the truth," and then he'd go right on. "That boy knows what he's talking about. I heard he plays a good guitar, too." Bill _____ one time, "Oh my God, now he's going to ask me to play the guitar when I haven't touched a guitar in five years."

VC: Now, how did you find the material to write about? Or who would take the pictures?

EP: Oh, just where there's a will, there's a way. I can't even remember most of it. There was as guy named Bob Yellin who was part of the Greenbriar Boys. He took a lot of photographs in the South. He was a photographer, a professional, and as the Greenbriar Boys went down there starting in 1959 or '60, he was taking photographs. So I just told him when they come out to bring a bunch of photographs and we'll have an exhibit. So that's what we did. So there were

photographs of people in honkytonks. He did a lot of that. He did things in churches. He just took bunches of photographs. I think I still have one of his exhibits in the back there.

VC: I'd love to see one. I mean, I'm curious. So you would install the photos and then you would write something up.

EP: Yeah. Well, Bob would identify what it was, what he was shooting, where it was, and so on. And then if there was something else interesting, I'd post that, too. It was just, you know, you'd find something. And then people would bring in stuff. I could have done more. It wasn't systematic. It should have been, but it wasn't. But when it happened, it was powerful.

VC: Were people from the early days who were more into Martha Schlamme, did they start to come back to the Ash Grove?

EP: Yeah. As the stuff – well, especially after the Beatles. But people who would come to hear Martha Schlamme at some point knew that Doc Watson was the greatest guitarist living, aside from maybe Andre Segovia, but what's the difference? I mean, there are huge differences, but I mean in terms of musical brilliance, if you like music, who could deny that? So they would come. Yeah. Doc went from playing with Clarence Ashley for a hundred people to playing with Fred and Clint, or then with Merle, his son, for five hundred a night. So that happened.

So anyway, yeah, but it wasn't completely that. There always were the Odettas, and Barbara Dane would come in. Barbara, of course, is a blues singer, but she didn't play as often after like '62, '63.

VC: That's when she got more involved with –

EP: Well, first of all, she moved back to Oakland, and then she started a nightclub, or she was booking a nightclub in San Francisco for a year or so. I think she then broke up with her husband, Byron, she went to New York, she met Irwin, he came out here, and by '65 she was living in New York. And then she got involved in the G.I. Movement and she sort of dropped performing, pretty much, except going around to these G.I. coffee houses that started to spring up as the war became big and unpopular, in Vietnam. A lot of these G.I. coffee houses were opening up starting in '66, '67. Barbara played all of them for three or four years. There were like twenty-three, forty, so she went all over the place.

So that was a period, and it got – the Colonels got very popular. Roland went off to the army, and that was okay. It wasn't great because he really was – vocally, he was really important. He was the leader of the group. But Clarence was there. I mean, the group was terrific. And LeRoy, a great bass singer and a wonderful dobro player. He split off because he just wanted to do religious music, which he still pretty much does. Except he played at the –

VC: At Royce Hall?

EP: At Royce Hall. But he played – he didn't play in Royce Hall, he played at the _____. At the Sherman performances he played on the bluegrass thing, and then on the gospel show. With him, it was – I also introduced him to his wife, who was our au pair from England. Because I knew he liked her, and she already mentioned that she thought he was just terrific. Before they went _____, I said, "I really think – I know you like Janis. Admit it." "Well, yeah." So I said, "How

about I get you on the phone with her and you guys could talk. Maybe you could go out or something." So he was persuadable. So I put them together. Well, they married and had kids, and she's been a born-again Christian. She started out being Jewish. (laughs) No kidding. From Brighton in England. I asked her how her parents took it, and she said it was a little hard. But they've been happy together. And she was there and it was great to see everybody.

So LeRoy left to do his religious gig. But they got Roger Bush and Bobby Sloan playing fiddle, Billy Ray on banjo, and Clarence.

VC: And these were younger kids, right? These weren't the old-timers.

EP: No. Yeah, that's right. They were the youth group that I was mentioning. Kathy and Carol, and the Chambers Brothers were sort of – well, the Chambers Brothers and the Kentucky Colonels, Country Boys were really from the country. But they were just much younger, so their socialization was much easier, the Chambers Brothers and the Kentucky Colonels.

VC: Can I ask you just like how the club ran, on like a day-to-day or week-to-week basis. So the Kentucky Colonels Friday, and the show would be –

EP: People played for a week.

VC: So if someone was playing –

EP: Yeah. They're there for a week.

VC: Like Monday through Sunday?

EP: No. Like Tuesday or Wednesday through Sunday. Mondays usually were for – initially for jazz, then for hootenannies.

VC: What's a hootenanny? Exactly. Like an open jam session?

EP: A song swap, basically. Somebody to lead it. So it would be sort of a songwriter session. And then it became the Ash Grove backup band, which meant it was the Rising Suns with Taj and Ry. It was King David and the Parables before then, with David and Bernie. And Barry Hanson, or Dr. Demento. It was Canned Heat, it was the group Spirit. My nephew Randy. And like that. And each one of those would – well, in King David's case, they dissolved. Everyone else became famous. Taj and Ry and Canned Heat and Spirit. Each one in their own way.

VC: So they would be there Monday nights just to back whoever –

EP: No. They would just be there. They'd do a concert and they'd take all the money. And we'd get the food and drink. We had a beer and wine license.

VC: Right. What did you charge to get in?

EP: I started off a dollar and a quarter.

VC: Why a dollar and a quarter?

EP: Well, it was going to be a dollar. I have two older cousins, they're both dead now. They were both accountants. They persuaded me and my assistant manager, Phil _____, that there was no way I could survive on a dollar, so I agreed to do a dollar and a quarter. (laughs) Then it became a dollar-fifty and then two dollars. I don't think it was ever more than two-fifty. Maybe two dollars, but I think two-fifty. Maybe three dollars, right at the end, the last period. But you could buy an Ash Grove discount card, good for six months or something like that, and it cost ten dollars and you could get in for a dollar or a dollar-fifty, something like that, half price. So people bought that, and it was good because

that meant they came back more often, especially the kids. They could manage to buy that for five dollars. If necessary, I'd let them in for nothing that night, or give them a bonus, something like that. So it was a good idea. So people became tied to the place and all that.

[phone – recorder off, then resumes]

VC: So you were saying.

EP: What do you want to know about the day-to-day operation?

VC: I'm just curious. So people would play for a week. You were just talking about the hootenannies, and so the hootenannies became – just Monday nights. Canned Heat would be playing, or Taj Mahal and Ry Cooder?

EP: Right. Monday nights was up for grabs, and sometimes Tuesday nights. I also did films. Interesting cultural and political films. Once I started doing it, I really got into it. What happened – to the best of my remembrance, this started – I can't remember when it started, but this little guy, little older man, started coming to the Ash Grove a lot. His name was Lester _____. And we talked about the music and – very, very nice guy. It turned out that he was originally from Hungary, and he was a member of the Film and Photo League, which I'd never heard of.

VC: That was the CP sort of arty film and photo types?

EP: Yeah, right. They did the 1934 general strike in San Francisco, and things like that. His daughter brought him in. His daughter was a kid, a young –

VC: Like a folkie?

EP: Yeah. A young girl. I think she went to Fairfax High or something like

that. So she brought her dad in. Real little guy. He talked about films. He knew where to get films, and so on and so forth. So that seemed interesting, so I said okay. So he shows up at two in the afternoon. First of all, he has a huge screen with him, so we hang the screen. He made it a gift. It was quite a job to hang it. Then he had a film and he set up sort of a thing in which he examined the film for flaws. (laughs) He set up an entire –

VC: Like an editing room?

EP: Well, not an editing room. I mean, basically, a projectionist room. He checked over the film, and he oiled it, and did this and that. So we showed a film. It was a great film on the San Francisco general strike. It was great. And a lot of people came. He had publicized the thing, and a lot of older people came, and it was great. So then we started doing a film series.

VC: When was that?

EP: Well, it started, I'd say, about '65, '66. So he brought catalogs of where you could get films real cheap. I don't know how I found out about this, but I found out – long story short, I went to the main Los Angeles library, and I made friends – no, maybe it was a customer. I think it was. Somebody who came to the films was a guy named Gene Partlow, a man about my age. I said, "Gee, that's a familiar name. Partlow. It's a different kind of name." He said, "Maybe you've read my dad. He used to be a columnist for the *Herald Examiner*, Vern Partlow." I said, "Vern Partlow? I remember him. Wasn't he the guy that got fired. He was blacklisted?" He said, "Yeah." But he's the person who wrote *Old Man Atom.* I'm going to tell you a story about Old Man Atom. I don't mean the Adam in the

Bible, and I don't mean the Adam that Eve created. It should be that created Eve. Hiroshima, Nagasaki. The Hiroshima song. And he wrote a number of other songs. He was a really important songwriter in the forties.

And it turns out that Gene was the head librarian for films at the L.A. library, and he had this ton of films that were great films. A film on the Native American community living in Bunker Hill, in Los Angeles, before Bunker Hill became what Bunker Hill is now.

VC: Oh, that was the one that just re-released, just a year ago.

EP: Yes, right. Well, I showed that back then, several times.

VC: It had just been made about then, right?

EP: I think it was made – it was made in the late fifties, where they have a powwow on Bunker Hill and just – well, it's a sad story. And we showed *Salt of the Earth*. That was also what we showed on Monday or Tuesday nights. So that became part of what the Ash Grove did, and that carried through to the end, all of that stuff.

Actually, what I was planning – I'll just skip forward because we're talking about film. I had become friends with Jane Fonda, when she became antiwar and whatnot. I met her. We had the first Women's Festival in the United States, and she was the co-host of it. So I met her then, in '71. And we actually became pretty good friends. She spoke at rallies I was part of, and whatnot. She was going to do a film series at the Ash Grove on Monday nights, and introduce films, and have discussions, and whatnot. That was one of the things I was going to broaden out the Ash Grove before we got burned down the final time, at the end

of '73. In spring of '74 I was going to diversify kind of – in a way go back to the way we started. Well, just to have a variety.

We're skipping ahead a lot, but at that point the old-timers were dying. The sixty generation was tired. The Ash Grove audience, from hanging around the streets, and whatever, the younger people were all settling down, getting married, raising families, staying home. The audience was diminishing. It became more and more difficult to make ends meet, and so on. So it was just a very difficult – it was obvious that to survive – the Ash Grove had a social function and no intention of closing, but it had to change its character.

I'd already started playing more jazz, but I wanted to gather the components that might signal a different direction. And I wasn't positive what that would be. It wouldn't necessarily have to be one thing. It could be a number of things. But to focus on the kind of thing that I'd been doing, including peace songs, including any political songs, including anything. I mean, it wasn't there, and the music was really not good. It was not creative. I mean, Holly Near was one of the few people that was really writing some great new music, and also attracting the young audience with a quality that so many others had done earlier. She was singular the last year or two of the Ash Grove. In looking at the book of who I booked, we still had some really big acts, and whatnot, and some really big paydays, but it just was different, and it was difficult. And I was tired. I was really tired. I'm just saying, we were going to do the film thing with her.

VC: Right. So the film thing, though, took off originally.

EP: Oh, yeah. Then the next thing on the Monday nights, now that we're into

variety, was – you know this guy Lipton who does the film things on Bravo, I think it is, where he interviews people?

VC: I think so.

EP: His name is Lipton.

VC: Okay.

EP: Well, he happens to be the son of Larry Lipton. Do you know who Larry Lipton was? King of the Beats. In Los Angeles. Well, he claims to have coined the phrase "the Beat Generation." He wrote for the Beats, I guess he called them. Larry Lipton was a – oh God, what's the name of his famous book? It really was an important book. His background was – I knew Larry. I never knew the son. I think he was already gone when I knew Larry. But before we opened the Ash Grove, Sherman, one of my brothers, knew this guy who had been the publicist for Universal Studios, Lawrence Lipton. He met with us and he told us how to get publicity, and some important things that were really lessons he gave us in the afternoon. He came in once in a while and we stayed in touch. I think he wrote the book called *The Beat Generation*, I'm pretty sure that was it.

So about '66, Larry came and told me he wanted to do a free university at the Ash Grove. And I think we did that on Tuesday nights. So for, I would say, a year we had something called the free – see, because the political thing wasn't really solidified. I mean, people were still supporting others, but the way they were expressing themselves was through dress and drugs and all kinds – there was no consistent direction. And I hadn't been really fully – I was not really engaged myself, and for myself that started a little bit later. So I thought was a

very good idea. He brought poets, and he brought films, and he brought – Lenny Bruce would drop in, you know, people like that, and whatever. And he got up on stage and would pontificate and analyze politically, and whatever.

VC: How many people would come?

EP: _____ something.

VC: Really. Every Tuesday.

EP: And the thing is, they paid up until some lady went to the *L.A. Times* because she refused to pay because it said free university. He explained to her that that meant it was free ideas. So she went to the *L.A. Times.* She was just so eager to nail Larry, because he's a Beatnik, and also, he was part of the establishment and he betrayed them by doing what he did. I mean, here was this guy who was one of the top publicists in Los Angeles, and to become what he became, the King of the Beats, they just said – anyway, so the *L.A. Times* took out after Larry, so he had to make it free, and then it sort of petered out after a while. But it was good while it lasted. I'm just saying, that's another example of something that happened. And there are probably other things that just aren't coming up now.

VC: Sure. So then, after that, so Wednesday through Sunday there would be one performer, or maybe two.

EP: No, no, no. There never was one performer. Never, never, never. Unless it was the Johnny Otis show, which was a long variety show in itself, a two-hour variety show. Johnny Otis got up there with about six different acts. Big Joe Turner, Little Esther Phillips, Eddy Clean-Head Vincent, the Three Tons of Joy.

Don't ask. I'm serious. Three giant women would sing rhythm and blues together. Once in a while, they would change character, but basically _____. (laughs) Black culture. It's not a huge insult or something. That was it. So people accepted that. And they got their money. They got more money, and Johnny supported half of them. So, Margie Evans. Really great – just consider that Central Avenue closed down years before, and Johnny was the last – the Barrel House was the last of that era, in the late fifties and early sixties. So by '68, '69, when Johnny started playing the Ash Grove, all of these great singers were just hanging around. So they were happy to do it. Big Joe Turner was a big star. Little Esther Phillips, and people like that. Margie Evans. Really good people, really great. Curtis Tilman. So many people, really excellent people, excellent.

VC: And it was still three bucks to get in? Two-fifty?

EP: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I never changed. I mean, I was finally persuaded that we could charge five dollars on New Year's Eve. That was as high as I could, out of principle – (laughs) Well, the principle was not to exclude anybody.

VC: Right. And was it all ages the entire time?

EP: Oh, yeah, it was. We started out with not having any liquor. I told you that story about being closed down and reopening with a license. But when we opened with a license we had to have a full restaurant menu, so we sold a couple of meals, nothing fancy, chicken dinners, things like that.

VC: And were you there most nights at the beginning? Or throughout the whole –

EP: Yeah. Throughout the whole.

VC: What was rent?

EP: Well, it was really not much. I think it started out three hundred a month for forty-two thousand square feet. And then the most it was up to was like four hundred. Then after it burned down, he rebuilt it, and he charged, I'm sure, thousands. But he liked me. He liked what we were doing. Old Morrison, the guy that ran the – he also was from Hungary. Then I fell in love with a Hungarian too. Me and Hungarians.

VC: Yeah, right. I wanted to ask to, throughout this entire time, the Ash Grove had people – it would be black audiences as well as white. It was never a white club. Was that normal?

EP: I don't know. I never went to any other places. A couple places I went to before then, I saw Billie Holiday at a jazz club. I got in somehow, with my brother, and I just sat there. That was black and white. I can't remember going to anything – I saw B.B. King once, also at a jazz club, in Hollywood, with my brother. Black and white. It never occurred to me to do otherwise. It simply never occurred to me. I mean, it would be against my being. But there was no problem. I can't recall – well, you heard what Taj said on that film. I honestly can't recall – one time, Taj accused Mike, one of the announcers. They never got along. So Taj accused him of being racist. Mike Best. And Mike denied it. But that gave Taj an edge in the argument. (laughs) That's as much as I remember. And I demanded peace and to take it outside, or just stop it. It was a personal argument anyway.

In the film, the other black guy, Carroll Perry, Carroll was really a very close friend of mine, and he kind of represented the Ash Grove to a lot of people. I never – I mean, there were other black people I hired, you know, whatever, but none of them as close as Carroll, I would say. He was there for like eight years or something like that. No, so there never was anything like that.

VC: But you didn't necessarily – I mean, I think it's just interesting. You didn't – or did you, set out to make an integrated club?

EP: I didn't set out anything. It was integrated, of course. That's all. That's all there was to it. I started out to make a great place with music. You start out with the blues and Flamenco and Guy Carawan, you got all the races right there. Seriously. Not all the sexes, but the races, at least.

VC: Right. That's right. Why don't we stop there today?

EP: Okay.

VC: It's been about an hour and a half. Just for the record, it's the sixth of February?

EP: It is. Let me just say that the next change is very interesting, that happened with the amplified music, with the introduction of the Beatles and Bob Dylan and –

VC: Was that '65?

EP: Yeah, '65 and '66. So we'll go into that. Because that drove out a lot of the acoustic instruments and some of the country – I mean, just the open door policy to any and all older country musicians didn't come to an end, but it severely changed it. Also, it began canting in favor of louder – the city groups

from northern cities, Chicago particularly, and their influence on the King Davids and the Canned Heats and their influence. That is, the younger generation actually going national on that level, and whatnot.

VC: When you went electric – it was always amplified on some level. There was a P.A. system, right?

EP: Yeah. And then amplified instruments.

VC: Were people offended?

EP: Yeah.

VC: Really.

EP: Me. At the beginning. I mean, just because I wanted it to be as down home as possible. Again, I was very much affected by the stuff that Harry Smith put out, and much of that – almost all of it was acoustic. So my concept of real music, music close to the lives of people, was acoustic, because who could afford an amp, and a lot of people never had electricity, so on and so forth. The kind of music that's made – also amplified instrument music was developed when all these strictures on what could be sung, and so on, were solidly in place, as opposed to before, when even though the recording industry stopped recording it, it still existed in the home. So the amplified music came from people that were actually competing commercially, and not in their home at all but in clubs, and whatnot. And they're in ghettos, they're not in the Delta. City music with dancing. Instead of Mance Lipscomb playing quietly alone in a _____, you're competing with a bunch of drunks in a big ballroom. So you amplify, you crank it up. So that's what it is. Country and city. So it is a different kind of music and a

different dynamic.

VC: It's interesting that you – I mean, I'm fascinated by that transition. To me, I think they're both great.

EP: Yeah, to me too. But I had a – all I had to do was hear it, but I didn't hear it until Bernie and David made me hear it.

VC: Really.

EP: Well, just played it. And Lightning asked me if he could play his amplifier.

VC: Yeah, right, because he played his amplifier –

EP: I know. And I said, yeah, I liked it. That was like '62, '63. But he was an exception mostly. Then people started bringing in – playing a bass, played with Lightning or played with somebody else. So it sort of crept in, but then it really went real – then we went to J.B. Hutto and the Hawks, and Buddy Guy and Junior Wells. Harmonica and guitar. So it really changed things. Then Willy, who had played for me acoustically with a bass with Memphis Slim, brought in the Chicago Blues Allstars.

VC: That would be '65, '66?

EP: Sixty-six, yeah. So there's a whole other – that's another thing we'll talk about.

VC: Right. That's amazing.

EP: Yeah. The downside is that it did affect – the reality is that the amplified music itself was beginning to – the not amplified music was beginning to be less attractive. The Kentucky Colonels, who had really risen to a tremendous

popularity, were not getting so much jobs. They were basically playing at the Ash Grove and country places. And then Clarence got enticed away into the Birds. So that's just a signal. I mean, the group basically, it was people ready to go back to – Roger, his father ran a car dealership in Phoenix, so he went home to Phoenix to take over from his dad and all that. He still plays music, but he must be singing the blues now. (laughs) A car dealership. He's probably retired now anyway.

VC: Okay. Well, we'll start there.

EP: Yeah.

[end]